

PRAIRIE PAGES

February 12, 2009



Lincoln delivers his farewell address in Springfield, Illinois, as he departs for Washington, D.C. to begin his presidency.

Volume 8 Number 1

Lincoln Bicentennial Issue: Lincoln's Years in Illinois 1830-1860

By Pete Harbison

GLOSSARY

milk sickness—a disease causing weakness, vomiting, and constipation; caused by eating dairy products (milk) or meat from cattle poisoned by certain plants

widow—a woman whose husband has died (a man whose wife has died is called a widower)

A BOY'S HARD LIFE

Abraham Lincoln was born on February 12, 1809, in Hodgenville, Kentucky, to Thomas Lincoln and Nancy Hanks. Abraham had an older sister, born in 1806, and a younger brother, born in 1812, who died in infancy.

Thomas Lincoln farmed frontier land for a living, as did most settlers in Kentucky at that time, but by 1816, Thomas Lincoln had lost three farms because his legal claims to the property were uncertain. Frustrated, he decided to move his family west into Indiana.

The 100-mile trip by wagon took two and a half weeks. Thomas Lincoln purchased 160 acres near Little Pigeon Creek where he farmed for the next 14 years.

As an adult, Abraham Lincoln claimed the Indiana farm as the place where he “grew up.” It was also the place where his mother died in 1818 from “**milk sickness**.” The next year, Thomas Lincoln married Sarah Bush Johnston, a **widow** with three children. She provided the care that Abraham and his sister needed. Abraham had a good relationship with his-

stepmother, supported her after Thomas Lincoln died, and called her “Mother” for the rest of his life.

While growing up in Indiana, Abraham, like most children and teenagers of the time, worked very hard. Because he was tall and very strong, the young Lincoln soon was doing the work of an adult. Much of that work was chopping down trees to clear the woods for fields and then building fences by splitting the logs into rails. In 1860 (in a reply to a request for an autobiography from John L. Scripps of the *Chicago Press*

GLOSSARY

extended family—a family that includes in one household near relatives (cousins, aunts, uncles, grandparents, nieces, nephews, etc.) in addition to the parents and their children (nuclear family)

homestead—a home and the land used or farmed by the family living there

clan—family

and *Tribune*) Lincoln described himself and his life at age eight in Indiana with these words:

Abraham, though very young, was large of his age, and had an axe put into his hands at once; and from that till within his twenty-third year he was almost constantly handling that most useful instrument—less, of course, in plowing and harvesting seasons.

THE LINCOLNS MOVE TO ILLINOIS

In the 1830s many **extended family** members lived and worked together. Very few farmers lived alone at this time because it took so much work to provide food, clothing, and shelter. The men cleared trees, built cabins and fences, farmed, hunted, chopped wood for cooking and heating, and built furniture. Cooking, caring for children and the old, and making clothes, candles, soap, and all the other necessities to survive were the chores usually done by the women. It was a difficult life; everyone in the family had to work very hard, and having many family members to help with all the work was very important.

In March of 1830, the Lincolns moved again, this time traveling 200 miles west into Illinois. Thirteen members of the extended family walked behind wagons loaded with all their belongings. They settled on uncleared land along the Sangamon River near Decatur, and there the family worked to establish a new **homestead**. Trees were felled to build a cabin and to clear land to plant crops. Their first year in Illinois was a memorable one. The winter was brutally cold and snowy and was later

called “the winter of the deep snow.” The Lincoln **clan** decided that the more northern climate of Illinois was too harsh and decided to move back south. Thousands of other Illinois settlers would make the same decision after experiencing the winter of 1830–1831.

On the return trip, the Lincolns met a group of settlers who talked them into staying in Illinois in what is present-day Coles County. Once again, Thomas Lincoln started a farm. But, Abraham Lincoln, now 22 years old, knew the time had come to put down his axe and start a new life away from his family and farming. In 1831, he moved to the village of New Salem in Sangamon County.

LINCOLN MOVES TO NEW SALEM

In 1831, only one out of forty people in Sangamon County lived in a town or village—most of the rest were farmers. But Lincoln made the decision to move away from farming and find a new way to support himself. He settled in the little village of New Salem where he lived and worked for the next six years.

Lincoln chose New Salem because a businessman, Denton Offutt, hired him to work on a flatboat crew going down the Sangamon, Illinois, and Mississippi rivers to New Orleans. Lincoln had made this journey once before, in 1828, when he was nineteen years old. The two trips to New Orleans did more than provide Lincoln with jobs. In New Orleans, he saw slavery being practiced.

LINCOLN IN NEW SALEM

Lincoln was a hard worker and through his work with an axe quickly became known as the “rail splitter”

Artist: Fletcher Ransom



GLOSSARY

surplus—extra; more than is needed or can be used

barter—to trade items without the exchange of money

shot—small lead or steel pellets used in a gun

board, boarded—to provide or to be provided with regular meals and lodging; a **boarder** is someone who pays or works for food and a place to stay

debate, debater—a formal, organized discussion of two sides of an issue or question; a **debater** is someone who participates in the discussion

subsistence farm—a farm that provides the bare minimum with little or no surplus for sale or trade

Some historians believe his memory of what he saw there stayed with him for the rest of his life. Offutt got to know Lincoln better after this trip. He planned to open a general store in New Salem and hired Lincoln to be the store clerk.

Farmers in Illinois during the early 1800s were able to grow enough food to live on and have a little **surplus**. The surplus was used for trading. Before manufactured goods were available in Illinois, almost everything was made by hand: soap, candles, cloth, clothing, shoes, furniture, and everything else a family needed in the home. The few items purchased in stores were acquired by bartering one set of goods for another. For example, a farmer might trade three pigs and twenty barrels of corn for a new gun, gunpowder, **shot**, and a new skillet. This was called the **barter** system. Offutt planned to bring such goods to his store and have Lincoln take care of the trading and selling (to people who had cash). Both men thought New Salem was a good location for this kind of business because so many new settlers were moving into the area.

YOUNG MEN IN NEW SALEM

In the 1800s very few settlers in Illinois lived alone. In 1830 Sangamon County had 13,000 residents and the census shows that only 2 of them lived alone. During his six years in New Salem, Lincoln did not have his own home but lived with many different New Salem homeowners. He traded or bartered his labor for a place to sleep and meals. Lincoln, like other “boys” without families, chopped wood, helped harvest crops, or split rails for fences to keep a roof over his head.

Young men in their twenties were usually called “boys” until they married and had children. There were many more single men than women on the frontier at this time, and finding a wife was not easy. Many times these boys referred to the adult men and women with whom they **boarded** as “Aunt” or “Uncle.” The New Salem area had several groups of these young, unattached men—Clary’s Grove Boys, Island Grove Boys, Sangamon River Boys, and the Sand Ridge Boys—who were friends and did things together. The boys competed in wrestling matches as well as running, jumping, and horse-racing competitions.

One well-known story about Lincoln during his years in New Salem involved his wrestling match with the tough leader of the Clary’s Grove Boys, Jack Armstrong. Because his boss, Denton Offutt, had bragged that Lincoln was smarter and stronger than any of the Clary’s Grove Boys, Jack Armstrong challenged Lincoln to a wrestling match to prove otherwise. Even though Armstrong was not as big as Lincoln, he was an experienced fighter. As Lincoln started to get the better of Armstrong, all of the Clary’s Grove Boys threatened to jump into the fight. Lincoln said he would fight all of them—one at a time. By showing that he was not afraid, Lincoln earned the respect of Jack Armstrong and the Clary’s Grove Boys. Lincoln and Armstrong became good friends.

Young Abraham was a popular member of the New Salem community. He was an excellent storyteller and **debater**. Clerking in Offutt’s store was a good job for meeting people, and Lincoln quickly made many friends. Almost everyone in the area came to know him during the next six years. Having many friends would help him later when he started his military and political careers.

Working at the store also gave Lincoln time to study. Lincoln, like most children living and working on **subsistence farms** in rural America during the 1800s, had little chance to attend school on a regular schedule. The total time he spent in school added up to about one year of formal education, but this did not keep him from learning. While he worked at Offutt’s store, he continued to borrow books and practice mathematics. He was a very smart young man and improved himself by taking advantage of every learning opportunity that came his way.



Written by Peter C. Harbison, Illinois Historic Preservation Agency
 Edited by Laura Reyman
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